

"Amen" in Hebrew Thought



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Everyone knows that Psalms are poetry. But aside from the beauty of ancient poetry, knowing the meaning of the individual words in Hebrew is paramount to the understanding the original meaning of these beautiful poems. Many people do not realize how much is hidden behind these simple words.

דְּרֶךְ־אֱמוּנָה בְּחַרְתִּי מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ שׁוֹיִתִּי:

“I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
I have set my heart on your laws.” (Psalm 119:30 NIV).

The Psalmist speaks of wanting to walk a דְּרֶךְ־אֱמוּנָה (*derech emunah*) – the “way of faithfulness”. The Hebrew word דְּרֶךְ (*derech*) literally means a “road”, “path,” or “way.” The writer actually wants to walk in God’s paths in a very practical manner. He places God’s ordinances before himself so that he can be mindful of them - so that they are right in front of him at all times. A simple meaning of the Hebrew אֱמוּנָה (*emunah*) is “firmness”, “stability/reliability”. A very well-known word אָמֵן (*amen*) - "Amen!" originates from this noun. What was heard is confirmed to be firm, stable and reliable.

The word מִשְׁפָּט (*mishpat*) means a “judgment”, “decree,” or “ruling.” The original term implies an idea of “judicial ruling on a specific case” or “an assessment of a concrete situation.” The common English translation of מִשְׁפָּט (*mishpat*) as “law” does not fully express this idea. The writer says, “your judgments I placed/set,” but there is no word for “heart” in the Hebrew text (this is so because Biblical Hebrew does not require it!). However, the form of the verb שׁוֹיִתִּי (*shiviti*) communicates the intensity of action, so it can indeed be translated as “setting before” or “setting on one’s heart.” The insertion of the English word, "heart," is interpretive but fully appropriate.

God’s ways are indeed stable, firm and true. It makes sense that one who desires righteousness would “choose” to walk such a path. Fixing our minds on how God ruled in certain situations enables us to live according to the intent and spirit of God’s laws.